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Dr. Gisevius, a witness who is not afraid to speak out

For the first time since Goering's theatrical and arrogant appearance another man has turned up at the Nuremberg trial who has been able to attract the attention of the world at large, or at least of thinking people, to the trial of the war criminals. This man was not an accused, an accuser or a judge, but simply a witness - Dr. Hans Bern Gisevius.

How is that?

No doubt partly because Gisevius had extremely important things to divulge, but above all in his person a German appears as accuser in a deeper sense and thus undertakes the part which Germans by rights ought to have undertaken from the outset. From the beginning it has been the weak side of the Nuremberg trial that judges and accused were enemies but not Germans. Owing to this the trial had become not only in the eyes of the world and still more in those of the Germans, whatever precautions may have been taken to secure every possibility of protecting and defending the accused, merely a kind of judgment passed on a defeated enemy.

There can be no doubt that National Socialism in the years of its power was guilty of so much cruelty that it has no right of itself to ask for mildness or even for justice. But the fact that a trial, at least when it is conducted on the principles of a liberal humanity, is not just a matter concerning the guilty and those awaiting condemnation, but also concerns the judges and accusers. If they deviate from the path of common equity they can sustain as much damage to their souls, even more, than the accused for whom, in this concrete case, there is no room for pity.

The appearance of Dr. Gisevius as accuser, however, has dragged the Nuremberg trial out of its previous vicious circle, if not formally, at least in conception. This was first and most strongly felt by the accused, especially Goering, who resented this witness immediately more than any foreign one, whom the proud marshal simply faced proudly, imitating a German martyr.

It seems certain that this is due to the fact that, as already stated, Gisevius is himself a German. Tall and heavy, often loud in his humour, frequently, too, a bit arrogant and self-conscious, but always clever and incorruptible, Gisevius has not remained for nothing a faithful friend and supporter of Pastor Niemöller, who started his career as submarine commander and then, when his conscience called him, entered Christ's service as an incorruptible combatant.

As son of a highly-placed administrative official, Gisevius was born in Arisberg, Westphalia in 1904. He attended school in Berlin and then the College of Lichterfeld. He studied law in Marburg, Munich and Berlin, and a few years before Hitler came to power he became a junior barrister in the service of Prussia.

In his book "Bis zum bitteren Ende" (To the bitter end), the second edition of which has just been issued by Fretz & Wasmuth, Zurich, and which enjoyed in the whole of Switzerland a success such as hardly any book has had since the publication of Rauschning's "Talks with Hitler," Gisevius writes of

-2-

himself: In my attempt to embrace an official career I was immediately caught into the revolutionary storms. They tossed me into a number of different positions and I nearly perished in them. I believe that I owe it to my dead friends and to myself to put to paper my most significant experiences and impressions."

Gisevius has been reproached with the fact that his attitude towards National Socialism has been very late in making its appearance. A critic of his above mentioned book writes in the "St. Galler Tagblatt": "Otto Strasser wrote his book about June 30 in the winter of 1934, Konrad Heiden his work on Hitler in 1935. These small and solitary persons threw down the glove to the man of power. They opposed in full responsibility their knowledge - however bitter the bread of exile might taste - to the concealments, the anxiously kept secrets, the smoke-screen of camouflaged, lying propaganda. And Gisevius, this clever and sensible man? He only found the courage to publish his book in 1946. This would have been a great achievement if it had appeared ten years earlier."

Nothing could be more wrong than to depreciate the merits of the books of Heiden and Strasser. Heiden's book is a clever, far-seeing analysis of the world peril represented at that time by Hitler and the Nazis. Strasser's "Deutsche Bartholomäusnacht" (The German St. Bartholmey's Night) often reveals the anticipations of a man of genius of what was being brewed in the third Reich for the destiny of the world at that time. All the same the comparison of these two books with that of Gisevius is out of place, because men like Heiden and Strasser wished to be writers, journalists and pamphleteers in the best sense of the word, while Gisevius by his origin and in his being was a clever policeman, a courageous and clear-sighted official who was able to do his best in the given circumstances; never in the rôle of an agitator but only in that of an active adversary and conspirator.

And he played this part bravely. He who, thanks to his position, was able to travel abroad, undertook the perilous office of a liaison officer between the German opposition and the Allies, especially the Americans. When he returned to Germany before July 30 his friends in Switzerland sensed that this man was playing with his life even if they had not the exact facts. As a matter of fact nothing more was heard of Gisevius after the unsuccessful attempt on Hitler's life. By a seeming miracle Gisevius was able to disappear after this failure. Nearly every night, hunted by Himmler's myrmidons, he was forced to change his quarters till, after long months, his accomplices managed to contact with Allied offices which sent him a forged SS diplomatic passport thanks to which he was able to escape to Switzerland three months before the end of the war. The "lion's cub" and subsequently simply the "cub" was the code word for the Allied accomplices whenever they spoke about Gisevius. This word is a pertinent description of the man and hints at the very least that a big, strong lion may grow out of a cub. In Nuremberg, in any case this lion has been able to roar to such a tune that it sounded anything but pleasant in the ears of that hard-boiled war criminal and

- 3 -

old lion-tamer Goering.

In spite of everything, however, the part played by a man like Gisevius is certainly not easily comprehensible to the mere moralist. It must lie in the nature of a man for him to venture further into evil than others without himself being gripped by that evil. If we were to award a coat-of-arms to Gisevius it would have to bear the salamander of the alchemists, with the motto "nutriso et extinguo," I feed on the fire and extinguish it.

By his very nature - and we feel this in his whole book - Gisevius felt himself at home in danger. He really underwent perils and evils just as the salamander goes through fire. This makes him and his book uncanny to many people. And rightly so, for the grim humour with which the author writes of all the horrors that took place around him and the same grim humour with which he also speaks of the dangers lurking near him has a terrifying effect to a certain degree. But it is precisely this apparent roughness and this grim humour that were necessary in order to be able to live in the German hell and to fight against it as far as possible.

Even if Gisevius did not succeed and could not succeed in emerging victoriously from this battle, it is certainly all to the good that someone conducted it in this way and came out, if not a victor, at least a survivor. For by his now being able to appear as accuser before the German potentates of yesterday, there is at least one German whose accurate knowledge of the things that happened enables him to stand up frankly and openly to the Nazi criminals and, as a German, and even to a certain degree in the name of the German people, to point his accusations at them. For Gisevius is more than simply a private person. He is the spokesman of a formerly respected official and juridical caste, which, indeed, failed in many ways under Nazi government, but will have to play its part in the future if Germany is to recover.
